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AUTHOR	El-Khawas, Elaine
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ABSTRACT

During the 2002-2003 academic year, six roundtables were held to explore uses of the data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for improvement of student learning. This paper describes the roundtable discussion held in Kentucky in December 2002. This roundtable focused on ways the NSSE can contribute to state-level efforts on accountability and institutional improvement. Participants included individuals with state-level responsibilities for higher education and representatives of three universities. Kentucky has already taken steps to combine attention to accountability with efforts to support institutional improvement. In recent years, all colleges and universities in the state have engaged in substantial activity to demonstrate and increase their educational effectiveness. Statewide surveys and workshops have been conducted, and the state has set specific goals and timelines for institutional action. In its review of Kentucky's experience, the roundtable focused on: (1) state-level uses of NSSE data; (2) institutional perspectives on uses of NSSE data; (3) observations of greater uses of NSSE data; and (4) NSSE data as a new source for communicating with important audiences. (Author/SLD)

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State-Level Uses of NSSE Data: Observations from Kentucky

Elaine El-Khawas

January 2003

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NATIONAL ROUNDTABLE SERIES

State-Level Uses of NSSE Data: Observations from Kentucky

By Elaine El-Khawas

During the 2002-03 academic year, AAHE and NSSE are conducting six roundtables to explore uses of NSSE data for improvement of student learning. A roundtable discussion held in Kentucky on December 3, 2002, focused on ways that NSSE can contribute to state-level efforts on accountability and institutional improvement. Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) co-sponsored and arranged the meeting. Participants included persons with state-level responsibilities for higher education and representatives of three universities.

Kentucky already has taken steps to combine attention to accountability with efforts to support institutional improvement. In recent years, all colleges and universities in the state have engaged in substantial activity to demonstrate and increase their educational effectiveness. Statewide surveys and workshops have been held, and the state has set specific goals and timelines for institutional action.

In its review of Kentucky's experience, the roundtable focused on:

- **State-level uses of NSSE data,**
- **Institutional perspectives on uses of NSSE data,**
- **Observations for greater use of NSSE data, and**
- **NSSE data as a new source for communicating with important audiences.**

State-level Uses of NSSE Data

Using a consortia model, Kentucky has made extensive use of NSSE as a basis for meeting state goals for improvement. This approach offers two important benefits: the sponsoring body (i.e., the Council on Postsecondary Education) obtains a full set of study results, by institution, and the consortium can add up to 20 questions to the survey form. All Kentucky institutions participated in the 2001 NSSE survey and will participate again in 2003.

As one participant noted, "An important benefit of NSSE data is that they help put Kentucky's progress and efforts into perspective." Comparisons to national data – whether showing that Kentucky scores lower or higher than others – help in understanding the state's current status and what needs to improve. NSSE results have pointed to "lower than predicted" performance on some aspects of the undergraduate student experience, for example.

Kentucky has found NSSE data helpful in several ways:

- **As benchmarks for assessing progress toward state goals**—To promote accountability and institutional improvement, Kentucky has developed a far-reaching set of state-level goals for postsecondary reform. Three of these goals focus on college preparation, enrollment growth, and student progress toward degrees. Two other goals address broad state priorities: that postsecondary institutions should prepare graduates for life and work and that Kentucky's communities and economy should benefit as well. The Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) has developed a Key Indicators project to monitor progress on this reform initiative.

  NSSE surveys offer a means to monitor improvement on several of the state's goals. NSSE results from 2001 offered valuable information, for example, on how well Kentucky institutions are promoting civic

engagement, which is relevant to the state's goal of preparing students for life and work. As one participant commented, "Such hard data on civic engagement can help demonstrate to university stakeholders – families, community leaders, the legislature, the business community – that universities help to improve the quality of life and work in Kentucky."

- **As a source of insight about student experiences**—CPE organizes an annual statewide faculty development conference to promote institutional improvement. Participants (about 400 to 500 faculty across all campuses) hear about good practices, both from invited speakers and through presentations by Kentucky institutions. NSSE data have helped to identify topics for attention at these conferences, and, because they cover each topic in sufficient depth, they allow discussion of what's working and not working for students.
- **As confirmation of what is shown by other studies**—Every state has a variety of statistics and studies on its postsecondary institutions, but findings from many home-grown studies can be inconclusive. Related data found in the NSSE surveys provide a larger context and a stronger basis for considering needed changes. For example, a recent state-level survey of alumni suggested that advising should be improved. The NSSE study, which had similar findings, confirmed this view. As a result, CPE is now planning a statewide conference on advising, which will address issues in advising first-year students and students in their majors.

Using the 2001 survey as a baseline, CPE expects all institutions to show progress on the NSSE survey by 2003. The goal is to have all institutions attain results that are above their predicted levels on all five NSSE benchmarks.

Institutional Perspectives on Uses of NSSE Data

University representatives at the meeting readily cited examples of NSSE's use as a diagnostic device for identifying weaknesses in current practices and as a way to monitor whether improvement efforts are making a difference.

Identifying Problem Areas

NSSE data offer detailed information about various aspects of the student experience. Examples cited include improving advising, making general education a more meaningful experience, promoting community service, demonstrating that teaching is valued, improving support services for graduate students, and developing broad standards for graduate programs. The provost at one university established a task force with three working groups that focus, respectively, on undergraduate students, graduate students and programs, and the institutional environment. Where NSSE results identify problems in these three priority areas, recommendations about needed effort are made to the appropriate group.

Each university has focused on different areas for improvement. Based on NSSE results, one university created a task force on the first year experience for students. At another university, review of the NSSE data pointed to the need for systematic attention to seniors. Its Assessment Committee is currently talking about ways that capstones or other synthesis experiences might be developed. Another participant noted that her university has a student success council — a cross-functional grouping from diverse program areas — that has found NSSE data useful in identifying potential solutions to problems. As one result, the institution's teaching and learning center is drawing on NSSE data to plan workshops to improve collaborative learning. NSSE data have helped another university become aware of student concerns that bureaucratic structures work against student needs. Data are helping internal groups find ways to streamline administrative procedures and make sure that key staff have the information they need to assist students.

Monitoring programs and progress

Kentucky universities have used NSSE results to assess their current programs and also to monitor whether improvement initiatives are having good results. NSSE data were especially instructive with respect to one university's recent initiatives for first-year students. NSSE scores among first-year students improved significantly on the benchmark for academic challenge over three years. These data provide evidence that several institutional efforts – new orientation days with increased academic content, a new advising center, revisions and improvements in University 101, new initiatives with the teaching and learning center – are making a difference.

One university used NSSE results to evaluate responses of students who were part of the Freshman Discovery seminars. At another university, NSSE data were "unpacked" by department or office so that they could be used in annual assessment reports. NSSE results on advising, for example, were given to the undergraduate advising office; NSSE results on diversity were provided to the office on minority affairs. At one university, the new president has called for measures to gauge the University's goal of being among the top universities in the United States. Several NSSE benchmarks will serve as measures for this important presidential initiative.

Observations: Toward greater Use of NSSE data

Roundtable participants offered several suggestions for how NSSE and other data can contribute to efforts toward postsecondary improvement.

- **A major strength of the NSSE approach is that it offers institutional comparisons.** For those items on which one university has lower than desired scores, it can be instructive to look at practices of schools that have higher scores. Comparisons with other institutions greatly strengthen the pattern, even if the comparison is only with eight to ten others. NSSE allows data to be reported by institution if all institutions agree, but individual states need to work out specific understandings on disclosure in order to make the best use of the data.
- **To look at educational progress for a state, it's critical to have benchmarks.** "Scores for Kentucky only take us so far," one participant said. "We need to compare these scores to the national picture and against other states. When we see a change in Kentucky's scores, we need to know whether the national trend is comparable: if we had a decline in some area, did others show a decline and the same amount of decline?"
- **Multiple measures and surveys complement each other and help confirm that action is needed.** NSSE's focus on specific student behaviors and experiences is a good complement to other, mostly factual, campus derived data on enrollment patterns and also to the small-scale studies that states and campuses regularly conduct (for example, on graduating seniors).
- **Emphasis should be on steps being taken for improvement.** It's important to find momentum and not to expect too much change right away. For many efforts, three or more years may be needed to show measurable progress in student experiences. Disappointing NSSE results can signal areas for change if results are interpreted with an eye toward improvement.
- **Comparisons of different groups of students can lead to new insights.** What are the patterns of behavior for students with high scores on certain experiences, for example, compared to students with low scores on the same experiences?
- **NSSE helps examine the student experience from first-year to senior year.** Where scores for seniors seem to be lower than those for freshmen, for example, more research might be useful. Do scores decrease during senior year, or have they dropped among junior-year students too? Depending on what patterns are found, different institutional interventions would be appropriate.
- **NSSE data can offer new perspective on the senior year.** One participant asked, "Are we correct in assuming that the senior year is primarily a fourth year of study, or is it better understood as a transition year in which attention has shifted to post-university decisions?" If so, universities may better serve seniors by offering better preparation for post-university life.
- **NSSE data provide a basis for new insights into problems of low persistence.** Profiles might be developed of those freshmen that are "at-risk" of dropping out, for example. The instructors of first-year students should have this information to guide their teaching. Also, NSSE data on transfer students offer additional information on their transition experiences. For some universities, a substantial proportion of graduates have transferred into the institution.
- **NSSE data help with improvement efforts targeted to various programs and academic departments.** NSSE results lend themselves to assessment of general education and also to assessments of major areas of study. NSSE results and their implications should be discussed at the department level to encourage faculty interest and discussion. Many other campus offices — for example, those arranging internships and service learning, career planning, residence life, and other areas — could benefit from the use of NSSE data. Insights from NSSE may help identify new models for effective student advising, especially how it could be structured for beginning students.

NSSE Data: A New Source for Communicating with Important Audiences

A number of participants pointed out that the NSSE data have been welcome as a new source of information. Because it addresses different questions, compared to other sources, NSSE illustrates new aspects of what universities do. The NSSE data have been useful in responding to questions from various constituencies about the student experience. Some observations include:

- **NSSE data help create a common language for discussing improvement.** They help identify broad and important issues that need to be part of institutional and policy conversations. One participant remarked, "NSSE has provided specific examples and ideas for discussing issues of academic challenge and student engagement, and also for discussing ways to enrich the academic environment." Another participant added, "NSSE results help give direction to improvement efforts, because survey responses not only point to a problem but offer suggestions for how to improve things."

- **NSSE results relevant to institutional improvement should also be shared internally**. One university reported that a six-page electronic newsletter, summarizing results on the five NSSE benchmarks, is sent to deans, other senior administrators, and department chairs. Timely placement of NSSE data on the institution's website has been helpful, for example, in informing several administrators who are new to leadership positions at the university.
- **NSSE data should be used to communicate directly to the public.** Community events could be scheduled around discussion of the NSSE results; informal forums could be scheduled with legislators, especially to discuss areas showing progress. The NSSE results could be very useful in building public support for the universities, because the results show that the universities are involved in helping to make Kentucky a better place to live.
- **NSSE data should be useful to the media.** This may call for working directly with reporters to facilitate their use of the data. Focusing on segments of the data, or certain topics, may be useful.
- **Providing information back to high schools should be a priority.** The NSSE data offer a good resource for conveying to high schools what expectations are at the university level. Such information could be directed to school superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents. High school students would also benefit from having specific information on what to expect of the college experience.

Final Thoughts

NSSE is distinctive in that it focuses on behaviors and experiences known to be related to student success in educational and personal development. The day's discussion helped to identify what is needed to promote wide use of this important data for improvement of student success and for accounting to multiple publics at the local and state level about student learning.

Participants in the Kentucky Roundtable

- Jan Applegate, Council on Postsecondary Education
- Karen Carey, Eastern Kentucky University
- Lou DeLuca, Education Arts & Humanities Cabinet
- The Honorable Jon Draud, State Representative
- Ed Ford, Office of the Governor
- Richard Freed, Council on Postsecondary Education
- Bill McCann, Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
- Sue Hodges Moore, Council on Postsecondary Education
- Connie Ray, University of Kentucky
- Bob Sexton, Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
- Roger Sugarman, University of Kentucky
- Elizabeth Wachtel, Eastern Kentucky University
- Mark Wasiesko, Eastern Kentucky University
- Christina Whitfield, Council on Postsecondary Education
- Shirley Willihnganz, University of Louisville

Project DEEP representatives

- Barbara Cambridge, AAHE
- Elaine El-Khawas, George Washington University
- George Kuh, NSSE

The national roundtables are part of the Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) Project, a collaboration between the National Survey of Student Engagement and the American Association for Higher Education, with support from Lumina Foundation for Education.

DEEP National Roundtable Series
Contact Information

Lacey Hawthorne, Project Manager
American Association for Higher Education
One Dupont Circle, Suite 360
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 293-6440 x 792 Fax: (202) 293-0073
lhawthorne@aahe.org
Www.aahe.org/DEEP
www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/deep/main.htm

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National Survey of Student Engagement
The College Student Report

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